

US SEAL Team Takes Back American Missionary in Niger

Missionary Philippe Walton thought he was on his own, kidnapped in Niger with his family left behind. The 27-year-old U.S. citizen discovered the grit and reach of a team of Navy SEALs when they rescued him Saturday.

Six gunmen brandishing AK-47 assault rifles burst into Walton's rural home in the middle of the night Oct. 26. They demanded money. When the farming family couldn't produce more than 20,000 CFA francs (\$35), they abducted Walton. His wife, daughter and brother were tied up and left at the house.

The special operation to rescue Walton was carried out Saturday by SEAL Team 6 in West Africa.

"U.S. forces conducted a hostage rescue operation during the early hours of 31 October in Northern Nigeria to recover an American citizen held hostage by a group of armed men," said Jonathan Hoffman, Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs in a statement. "This American citizen is safe and is now in the care of the U.S. Department of State.

No U.S. military personnel were injured during the operation.

"The United States will continue to protect our people and our interests anywhere in the world," Hoffman added.

During his pre-election travels, President Donald J. Trump thanked the special forces, calling them "incredible people" and "the best in the world."

"It was something that had to get done because they were playing with American citizens," he said. "We can't let that happen."

In a tweet Sunday, the president said: "Last night, our

country's brave warriors rescued an American hostage in Nigeria. Our Nation salutes the courageous soldiers behind the daring nighttime rescue operation and celebrates the safe return of yet another American citizen."

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– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) October 31, 2020

Walton had been living and working as a missionary near Massalata for a year. He also farmed.

More than three-fourths of Niger, which is north of Nigeria, is covered by the Sahara Desert and the Sahel, dry grasslands and savannas that extend across Africa. The region has become a hotbed of Islamic militants. Niger and northern Nigeria are both predominantly Muslim.

Niger has seen a growing number of attacks by extremists linked to both the Islamic State group and al-Qaida, according to Military Times. Walton's kidnapping comes two months after ISIS-linked soldiers killed six French aid workers and their Niger guide while they were visiting a wildlife park east of the capital.

While it was not believed the kidnappers were directly related to a known terror group, there were concerns that they intended to sell Walton to such a group across the Nigeria border. American forces were quickly activated to carry out the raid.

"The United States is committed to the safe return of all U.S. citizens taken captive," said a U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in a public statement. "Thanks to the extraordinary courage and capabilities of our military, the

support of our intelligence professionals and our diplomatic efforts, the hostage will be reunited with his family.

“We will never abandon any American taken hostage.”

According to Open Doors’ 2020 World Watch List, this region of Africa is under increasing threat from Islamic extremist groups. Statistics released in the organization’s report show 2,983 Christians as killed for faith-related reasons—an average of eight Christians per day. Also this year, nearly 9,500 churches or Christian buildings have been attacked.

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